Tues

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

CAN I TRUST GOD AND SCIENCE?
September 19, 1999

John M. Buchanan

In the classical scheme, God is indeed above all, with a throne so high it cannot even be seen from the earth . . .What about the God who is not only above all but also through all and in all? Where is God? All over the place. Up there. Down here. Inside my skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light . . .revealed in that singular, vast net of relationships that animates everything that is. It is not enough for me to proclaim that God is responsible for all this unity. God is the unity—the very energy, the very intelligence, the very elegance and passion that make it all go. This is the God who is not somewhere, (up there, down here) but everywhere, the God who may be prayed to in all directions at once. This is also the God beyond all directions who will still be here (whatever 'here' means) when the universe either dissipates into dust or swallows itself up again.

Barbara Brown Taylor
"Physics and Faith: The Luminous Web"
The Christian Century

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CAN I TRUST GOD AND SCIENCE?

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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John 1:1-5
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31
Ps. 8

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and speak your saving, liberating word to us this day, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In 1633, a 70 year old man was summoned to a Dominican Convent in Rome. There, in the presence of the Inquisition, he got down on his knees and read a statement they had prepared for him.

"Wishing to remove from the minds of your Eminences and of every true Christian this vehement suspicion justly cast upon me, with sincere heart and unfeigned faith, I do abjure, damn, and detest the said errors and heresies, and generally each and every other error, heresy, and sect contrary to the Holy Church; and I do swear for the future that I shall never again speak or assert orally or in writing, such things as might bring me under similar suspicion."

His name was Galileo Galilei. He was an astronomer. He believed, on the basis of his observations, that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the solar system, and that the earth was one of the planets that revolved around the sun. He was influenced by the work of a Polish scholar by the name of Copernicus. Copernicus knew that his ideas would stir up a lot of trouble with religious and civil authorities, and so he kept them to himself, arranging for their publication after his death.

It has been said that Copernicus is the only thing Catholics and Protestants agreed on in the midst of the Reformation. He was condemned by all, including John Calvin and Martin Luther. The earth had to be at the center: the sun moves, not the earth—that's what the Bible says.

In 1616, the Catholic Church banned all books that suggested that the earth moved at all. Galileo got in trouble by doing just that—publishing a book in 1632 based on Copernican ideas and his own observations.

There is a wonderfully ironic post script to his story. After he recanted, the Inquisition sentenced him to house arrest and to listening, each day for the remainder of his life, the seven psalms of penitence. He lived for eight more years and as his daughter read to him, he sat by his window watching the planets revolve around the sun through his telescope. (See Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Luminous Web," *The Christian Century,* June 2-9, 1999)

It is not one of the penitential psalms but I do hope that every now and then she slipped in Psalm 8:

"O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in
all the earth . . .
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that
you have established;
What are human beings that you
are mindful of them? . . ."

The story of religion and science is not pretty. In an article about science and faith in the *Chicago Tribune* a few weeks ago, Ron Grossman observed that, "Science and religion have been battling for 400 years now. Science has won every round." (*The Chicago Tribune,* 9/5/99)

Mr. Grossman's article was a good one but that statement is something of an over-simplification. Some science and some religion have battled and are battling today. But some science and some religion are not only not battling, but never have. And today there is a remarkable new climate characterized by dialogue and respect. Some religion does not see science as a threat at all, but welcomes inquiry and discovery into the nature of things as a way to more fully appreciate God's amazing creativity. Some religion is embarrassed by the attempt to appropriate all of us in the most recent version of the 17th century Inquisition, namely the continuing effort by Creationists, and self-styled "Creation Scientists," to replace authentic science with religious ideology.

The issue, of course, is evolution, Charles Darwin's theory that we are here, not as a result of a single act of creation, which according to careful calculation, based on the Bible, happened on the evening of October 22, 4004 BC, but as a result of a slow process of evolution, spanning millions of years, guided by a principle he called "natural selection." Darwin did not attack religion. There is some disagreement, but there is some evidence that he remained a believer all his life. And he is buried in Westminster Abbey. But he has been demonized in a way that would probably amuse him. His theories were attacked and defended in the Scopes Trial which in 1926 featured two popular and dramatic protagonists: Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan—a Presbyterian, by the way, and unsuccessful Moderatorial candidate, who was a distinguished and brilliant American who should never have been in that courtroom in the first place.

The demonization continues, recently in the decision of the School Board of the State of Kansas, to discourage the teaching of evolution by eliminating questions about it from student tests. A spokesperson for the Board said that the decision was made because evolution is just a theory accepted by some scientists; no one was there to observe it. The first part of that statement is true. Evolution is a theory—that's what science is: theories based on the best current evidence we have. Science is science precisely because it knows that the best ideas we have can be refuted by new evidence and frequently are. The second part of the statement that some scientists accept evolution, is patently false. The

vast majority of scientists accept evolution as the best theory about how we got here, based on current physical evidence.

Stephen Jay Gould, Professor of Geology at Harvard, wrote in *Time* that evolution is the "central concept of biology, as well documented as any phenomenon in science, and eliminating it is like trying to teach American history without Abraham Lincoln." We should cringe in embarrassment, Gould wrote, at the "suppression of one of the greatest triumphs of human discovery." (*Time*, 8/23/99)

What has happened is that the anti-evolution folks, in the name of Biblical religion, have become extremely well organized, adept at using the political process to get their people onto school boards. Kansas is simply the most recent skirmish. The Institute of Creation Research, based in California, is a large and effective resource center and political lobby for what is known as "Creationism," or "Creation Science." It's current strategy is to persuade school boards to replace evolution with the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2, or at least to present both concepts on an equal footing. What's wrong with that? Why not present both evolution and Genesis 1 in public school classrooms?

The trouble is that Creation Science is not science. Science examines evidence, sifts, sorts, and then elevates just a handful of ideas to the status of theories which are constantly critiqued, examined, questioned and replaced when the evidence warrants. Creationism begins with a doctrinal position and then seeks for evidence to prove it. It's all right to do that, by the way. It just isn't science.

Second, what Creationism teaches is wrong. Evolution is not an undocumented theory being foisted on us by a few godless liberals. The fossil and geological evidence for evolution is simply overwhelming. We may not know the whole story of how we got here, but the vast majority of scientists are confident that we did, in fact, evolve.

Third, the Creationists are misusing the Bible. The objection to Biblical fundamentalism or literalism has always been that it is the wrong way to use scripture. The Bible is not a scientific or historical text book. It is a collection of books written by God-inspired people telling the story of their experience of God and God's relationship to the creation. And if we insist on making it into something it is not—a scientific text—we will miss what it is, and what it says, which is God's word to us.

Fourth, I object to Creationism for the same reason I cringe every time I hear the story of Galileo and the Inquisition, or any effort to impose an ideological or theological screen on academic freedom. True faith is not threatened by scientific inquiry, but welcomes and celebrates it. Very near the heart of my faith is the conviction that in Jesus Christ I/we have nothing to fear, certainly not scientific inquiry. In fact, my faith welcomes new scientific discovery as even more evidence of God's amazing and mysterious creativity.

Did you know, for instance, that in some places on the earth great flocks of migratory birds assemble to fly thousands of miles over the ocean? And all sorts of birds which prey on one another normally, are in those flocks: hawks and sparrows. But the larger birds do not prey on the smaller ones during the migration: almost, someone said, as if the "peace of God" had been imposed.

In the meantime, there is a whole new environment between scientists and theologians in spite of the evolution battle. Albert Einstein once said that "religion without science is blind, but science without religion is lame."

In the near future, scientific advances will continue to precipitate questions of value and ethics and morality. Genetic engineering, for instance, cloning. Medical researchers predict that treatment for aging will probably be refined by the middle of the 21st century so that human life can be significantly extended—perhaps up to 500 years. But should it be? Is that a good idea? For those who long to see a World Series in Wrigley Field—it does sound reasonably hopeful. Much closer to home and reality is the decision, made everyday in the Intensive Care Unit, to use or not to use available medical technology to prolong human life: a moral as well as a practical decision made necessary by advances in science.

While some folks are fighting about whether creation happened in six days or six billion years, a quiet revolution is happening within the scientific community. I don't pretend to even begin to comprehend it, but what I do understand fascinates me. It has enormous implications for how we think about the world and it makes the scientists, more and more, sound like theologians.

Until just a few years ago, we understood the universe in terms of Newtonian physics, the theories of Sir Isaac Newton, who lies right beside Charles Darwin in Westminster Abbey, by the way. Newton's universe is mechanical, predictable, operating on the basis of four mathematical laws. There is no room in a Newtonian universe for random, surprise, unpredictability: not much room for God except as the creator of the machine, who simply observes its regular and predictable operation.

Today, however, something called Quantum Physics and Chaos Theory has replaced Newton's ideas. In Quantum Theory, the way I understand it, stuff happens, not always predictably. Instead of a machine, Barbara Brown Taylor says, the universe is most like a web, which shakes and moves and responds to every single stimulus on or in it. "Physical reality," she says, "refuses to be compartmentalized. As hard as we may try to turn it into a machine, it insists on acting like a body, animated by some intelligence that exceeds the speed of light." (op.cit.)

And so, suddenly, instead of a universe with no place for God, we find that we are living in a universe that is alive, responsive, full of spirit, full of energy, full of something—

How about this?

> "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, ... Then God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light."

That is not scientific theory about the beginning of the universe. It is proclamation, written to express a bold, new and revolutionary theological affirmation. Furthermore, it

was written to address a very real historical situation—which was to find a reason to keep on trusting God at a time and place when there weren't many reasons for doing so.

Those words were written in the 6th century BC for a community of Jews living in exile in Babylon: living in what seemed like a hopeless, God-forsaken, God-abandoned situation. "Where is our God?" they surely asked. "Maybe there is no God?". "Maybe the gods of Babylon are just as real and useful as our God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob."

Professor Walter Brueggeman says that the Genesis Creation story was written to evoke the faith and trust of a community of desperate people, a life saving, life affirming confession like that wonderful question and answer in the Heidelberg Catechism:

> "What is your only comfort in life and in death?
>
> My only comfort is that I belong, body and soul, in life and death, not to myself, but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ."

To people who feel God-forsaken, abandoned, without hope—and who hasn't felt like that?--the words of Genesis 1 are good news. You belong to God. Creation belongs to God. God is still God.

The reality of God is life saving news to oppressed people in all ages. Ron Grossman's Tribune article was about science, religion, the Big Bang theory and the evolution-Bible debate. And at the very end, Grossman made what I thought was a remarkable personal faith statement. He admits that he doesn't know whether he believes all the words in the Bible are true, or whether the mandate to fast on Yom Kippur are God's words. But he will fast anyway. He writes:

> "It's not that I'm all that consistent. But one thing I cannot doubt is that amid the horrors of the Holocaust, other Jews clung to the Day of Atonement and fasting. Even in the extermination camps, those who lived in the shadows of the gas chambers fasted. Elie Wiesel reports 'Some argued that fasting at Yom Kippur was too dangerous because they were already half-starved to death.
>
> But others said it was necessary to fast precisely because of the danger. It was necessary to show God that, even here, in this miniature hell, we were capable of singing God's praises.'" ("For Some, the Big Bang is a Leap of Faith," *The Chicago Tribune*, 9/5/99)

The text speaks a word of hope to people who have given up. God is the Creator. The world belongs to God. And you, men and women, are God's agents, given dominion and responsibility. The creator is counting on you. And furthermore, the whole project is good. God rejoices and delights in the beauty and goodness of creation.

That was a very different word for the exiles. No one believed creation is good. Life is mean and short, full of injustice, suffering and death. Goodness is somewhere and

something else. No one believed that human being were responsible agents, God's partners in the management of creation. Everybody knew human beings were insignificant, unimportant, living and dying at the whim of the gods.

It was new and revolutionary, and still is. The precious words of Genesis are a "declaration of the Gospel: there is a new world surging with the mystery of God." (See Brueggeman *Genesis, An Interpretation,* p. 26)

How sad to miss it, to be distracted by the controversy and arguing over evolution. How sad not to hear the glory and hopefulness of what we believe. It is God's world. It is a good and beautiful world because God made it. Creation is good. Physical reality is good. Human flesh, human appetites, are God's creations. How sad to miss the music and poetry and laughter of God's good creation—a creation full of suprising grace, a creation poet Wendell Berry discovers on his Sabbath walks in the hills of Kentucky:

> "Hunting them, (the Lilies) a man must sweat, bear
> the whine of a mosquito in his ear,
> grow thirsty, tired, despair perhaps
> of ever finding them, walk a long way. . . .
> He must be led along the hill as by a prayer. . . .
> I found them here at first without hunting,
> by grace, as all beauties are first found . . ."

A creation full of the beauty Vincent Van Gogh saw when he looked deeply into the faces of Dutch potato farmers or a field of sunflowers.

A creation full of passionate gratitude to which e.e. Cummings gave incomparable expression:

"i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes . . . ."

A creation full of mystery that I experience every summer when I walk down to the end of the deck at the ocean and lie back on a bench and look up into the star-filled, infinite darkness, and find myself saying words I've known since childhood—

> O Lord, our Lord,
> How majestic is thy name
> When I look at your heavens,
> The moon and the stars . . .

A creation full of God and God's love, into which God came and comes in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our brother, our Lord and Savior—about whom a poet long ago wrote:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:1-5)

O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is your name. Give us eyes to see the beauty of your creation; give us ears to hear the music you play for us; give us the senses to know the goodness of all you have made, O God, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayers of the People - Sunday September 19 1999

8.30 a.m. and 11 a.m.

In the beginning before time,
before people, before the world began,
God was.

Here and now,
among us, beside us,
enlisting the people of earth
for the purposes of heaven,
God is.

In the future,
when we have turned to dust,
and all we know has found its fulfillment,
God will be.

Almighty and ever loving God,
in whom we live and move and have our being,
hear our prayers for the world and for each other.

Creator of all things,
we praise you for the knowledge given to us to search out and harness the hidden forces of nature.
Bless the work of those who carry on the work of science in all its forms.
Grant with increasing knowledge,
increasing wisdom,
that they may use their discoveries and inventions for the welfare of all
and the relief of those who suffer most.

We pray for those who push back the bounds of technology;
programmers, medics, designers, creatives,
all who provide us access to the speedy global communications
we have become accustomed to.
But we remember, Lord,
that most people in our world are excluded from this network;
that their needs are more basic,
not the newest chip or the fastest modem,
but food and water, healthcare and shelter,
freedom from violence and fear.
Lord, put our technologies at the service of the poorest.